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ABSTRACT

The academic setting for many students is frightening, but it is especially so for students with a strong religious background. For such students, the academic atmosphere is, at best, not neutral but empty of teachers and classes that would encourage them to deepen their religious resources. In a "Point of View" essay in the "Chronicle of Higher Education," Professor Robert N. Sollod called the current curriculum of American colleges and universities "the hollow curriculum" as "American universities now largely ignore religion and spirituality." That may be the best situation religious students encounter. More often they encounter an environment hostile to religion. What writing instructors, especially, must do at this junction is learn how to deal with ideas and experiences that are vital to a good number of their constituents. They must recognize and appreciate the range and variety of verbal forms that reflect and constitute what William James called the varieties of religious experience. Prophetic discourse would be one of these verbal forms. The prophetic genre is both a crystallization of and the impetus for such forms as personal testimonies or autobiographies, lyrical meditation, and songs that appropriate or develop religious symbols. Expressive discourse can be used as a means of building the kind of premises and connections among a group of students that is necessary for good persuasive discourse. Contains seven references. (TB)

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The Writing Classroom as a Spiritual Site of Composing

This paper has its origins, in part, in two sessions at the 1992 meeting of the Conference on College Composition and communications at Cincinnati. One of the sessions was entitled "Spiritual Sites of Composing." I found it noteworthy for three reasons.

First, is the subject matter--writing about religious or spiritual experience. The second is the fact that all the writing discussed was done and responded to in off-campus, non-academic settings--a woman's support group, for example, or an Alcoholic Anonymous group. The people making the presentations were all academics, all frequent participants in 4 C's programs, but they had to leave their professional setting where they taught writing in order to find writing about spiritual experience. And the third reason is the size of the audience. There was a standing room only crowd in one of the larger lecture rooms of the convention center.

The other session was noteworthy in a quite different way. It was a session presented by a panel from the Minneapolis area on helping students in a standard academic setting write about their religious experiences and convictions. The panelists were from both private, denominational colleges and public colleges

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and universities. They talked about their classroom experiences, and the questions following the presentations tended to focus on the students who were judged to be fundamentalists, members of the religious right. In the urban setting where the panelists worked, the so-called "fundamentalists" included Islamic students as well as students from a variety of Christian backgrounds. One member of the audience was there, he admitted, to learn about such students so that he might be able to help them break out of their fundamentalist restrictions.

I had thought of entitling this paper "By the Waters of Babylon: How Can We Sing Our Songs to God in a Hostile Environment?" The academic setting for many students is frightening, but it is especially so for students of a strong religious back-ground. For such students, the academic atmosphere is, at best, not neutral but empty of teachers and classes that would encourage them to deepen their religious resources. In a "Point of View" essay in the Chronicle of Higher Education, Professor Robert N. Sollod called the current curriculum of American colleges and universities "the hollow curriculum" as "American universities now largely ignore religion and spirituality."

That may be the best situation many religious students encounter. More often what they encounter is an environment hostile to religion. Professor Mark Schwen of Valparaiso University in Exiles From Eden sees that the current academic climate is hostile to religion and traces the intellectual history of that hostility back to the epistemological project of the En-

lightenment. He accepts either of two labels for that project--objectivism or foundationalism. He argues "that objectivism arose initially and that it subsequently gained cultural domination primarily because it was intended by its architects as a way of avoiding violence" (Schwen 30).

The origin of that violence was religious conflict, and in the context of objectivism almost all traditional manifestations of religion were painted with the same brush. According to the objectivist tradition, religion is at best a group-think, an anti-intellectualism; at worst, it is a crusade seeking to become a moral majority by suppressing all opposition. Nonetheless, in the name of objectivity and the avoidance of suppression, some voices are suppressed.

We need to learn how to deal with ideas and experiences that are vital to a good number of our constituents. We need to learn how to respect their experiences, so that we treat them effectively--not just in off campus settings--but in our classrooms and on campus. We in the literary profession especially need to recognize and appreciate the range and variety of verbal forms that reflect and constitute, as William James put it, the varieties of religious experience. What we receive from strongly religiously committed students in writing exercises, what we hear in the news and see on bumper stickers and placards is the response of people to what they experience as a hostile and threat filled environment. Martin Marty, the Fairfax Cone Distinguished Service Professor at the University of Chicago, who has been directing the Fundamentalism Project of the American

Academy of Sciences, has called attention to this experience of existing in a hostile environment among so called fundamentalists. Marty concedes the abuse and threats of fundamentalist approaches, not only on the basis of his research but also on the basis of experience. He has been the target of fundamentalist criticism for his scholarly work over the years. However, he also asks his colleagues to recognize the genuine humanity of people in religious movements. Marty writes,

> There really are monsters out there in fundamentalist groups, as in many other religious and political movements. But there are also fearful, law-abiding, well-intending citizens in many societies whose own cries of pain and shouts of resentment deserve a hearing. (A56)

We need to help our students who come from that variety of religious experiences to put their experiences into a larger context without negating their experience. To do that we need to recognize the dynamics of religious experience and the variety of verbal genres that embody those experiences. By doing so we can help the students grow into their primary identities more fully. On the other hand, we also need to recognize the correspondences between traditional religious modes of appropriation and expression of experience and secular or non-religious experience. I believe that the same social-psychological dynamics are at work in the experience of both groups and that the same variety of verbal forms is put to similar uses by both groups. One advantage that studying these dynamics and forms within traditional religious groups is the number, variety, and stability of such

groups, the abundance of written sources for study, and the abundant opportunity to observe such groups in meetings or worship services and to see first hand the role of verbal forms in their communal life.

A telling instance of the awareness of this variety of forms and the various purposes they can serve within both a particular faith community and the larger communities the specific community is related to is a collection of psalms by Benjamin F. Chavis Jr. These psalms were written while Chavis was serving time in North Carolina jails in 1972 and later from 1976 to 1979 as a member of the Wilmington Ten. Chavis wrote in the introduction to that collection:

> I became increasingly conscious of the importance of trying to document as much of the experience of prison as possible. The prison cell became a place to do theology as a critical function of the ongoing freedom movement. In other words, I wanted to strive to extract from that experience whatever lessons were possible for future theory and practice. Throughout my imprisonment, I managed to record in writing most of my theological and ethical reflections. These were expressed in several literary forms: prayers, laments, meditations, exaltations, critical interrogations, poetry, prophetic prose, doxology, and liturgy. (xx)

Clearly, a great variety of verbal forms is used to express and embody religious experience, but the religious genre we are probably most familiar with is the prophetic utterance. It is the form that we associate with the religious right. It comes across to outsiders as shrill, strident, phobic, and mechanically repetitive. It is important that we remind ourselves that it was

also the primary form of the religious foundation for the civil rights movement as well as parts of the movements against the Vietnam War and nuclear weapons. It is often the genre through which people learn of the destruction of the rain forest or the ozone hole or of the dangers of population growth, sexual harassment and gender inequality, or AIDS. Prophecy has both a negative and positive side. It can condemn, but it can also establish hope and endurance and point toward a fuller way of life. To understand the nature and use of the prophetic form and to help students work with it and from it, we must temporarily bracket its immediate use so that we can help students get at its origins and possibilities.

The prophetic utterance is generated from and generates other forms. No genre within the full community of discourse stands by itself. The prophetic genre is both a crystallization of and the impetus for such forms as personal testimonies or autobiographies, lyrical meditation, and songs that appropriate or develop religious symbols. It generates from and in turn generates epistles of encouragement, instruction, or admonition to specific audiences (such as Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"). We may know the prophetic utterance more properly as manifestos that express group solidarity or an agenda for collective action (such as The Methodist Bishops' Letter on Nuclear Arms, "In Defense of Creation").

We academics are particularly prone to privileging a limited range of discourse types, with an almost preemptive status given either to scholarly discourse in which we speak only

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to other academics or to discourse exemplifying the unique voice that is self-creating. Perhaps the advantage to our exploring off campus sites of composition is that we find ourselves in a richer, more diverse community of discourse. A historian of Roman Catholic social thought, David J. O'Brien, as a result of his academic work was invited to participate directly in social ministry. He helped to plan conferences and gave talks and workshops. That experience changed his understanding of the academic vocation:

> This work built friendships and gave me experiences of authentic community: people united by a common vision, sharing common language and meaning, working for common ends, and praying and celebrating together.
>
> This experience also transformed my understanding of the intellectual life. I had enormous respect for the shock troops working in the church's most difficult ministries. I continually learned from them about faith, culture, and politics, about power and its uses, and about the tough work of building democracy among real people. I was awed by the experience of being told that they found my work useful and affirming, that they appreciated the critical lens I tried to hold up to their language and symbols as I tried with them to understand how to translate religious meanings and moral values into public practice. Abstract ideas of theory and practice and action and reflection were made real by dialogue with experienced, mature adults, mediated by communities of faith and moderated by the healthy, unromantic Catholic realism of the older generation....(12)

We also teach our students to treat pieces of discourse discretely, atomistically. For instance, we ask students to write persuasive discourse and then criticize what they have

produce because they have only preached to the converted and have not persuaded anybody; we critique the students because they have not found an audience. It is true that persuasive discourse is audience specific, but we also have known from the time of Aristotle's Rhetoric that effective persuasion is based on premises received from the audience. That is to say, that effective persuasion is based on some degree of solidarity, or identification with the audience. We ask students to write persuasively, but we do not help them find community or bring more fully to mind the communities they belong to. Instead we ask them to persuade the class, with whom, from their perspective, they have only an accidental relationship. We put them in a situation which can provide them no premises on which to base their arguments.

Some of the premises that are needed to persuade an audience will be found in other pieces of persuasive discourse, but the mother lode of premises, the key symbols and images, key terms and definitions, the most telling examples will be found in what James Kinneavy has called expressive discourse. In Kinneavy's judgment, "expressive discourse is, in a very important sense, psychologically prior to all the other uses of language" (396). Expressive discourse--which includes manifestoes, testimonies such as autobiographies, prayers, meditation, poetry--reflects and establishes the solidarity of a group. We distort the process of communication by isolating genres and prevent ourselves from realizing that referential and persuasive forms depend on expressive forms of discourse. Instead of rejecting

out of hand the prophetic utterances or the persuasive pieces that "preach to the converted," we should encourage the students to go back to the sources of their prophecies and arguments so that they can recover the symbols, ideas, and experiences that underlie them. Next the students need to be encouraged to explore the variety of written resources within the tradition of their communities--the meditations, prayers, songs, testimonies and autobiographies, manifestos, the full range. This move will give them a firmer grasp of their experience and a confidence to explore further both the experience within and the world without.

One advantage of becoming more aware of the verbal forms of religious movements is that we can get a more accurate sense of the social-psychological dynamics of communication and relatedness. A second advantage is that we can help all our students--those with strong religious convictions as well as other students--to find and to express the solidarity that they need to write well, and that solidarity is also the foundation from which they can explore new situations.

There is one more advantage I want to address briefly--cognitive and intellectual growth. Such growth can also be stimulated by encouraging students to explore their spiritual roots. The students will discover a variety, a genuine pluralism of exemplary figures who may have shared a prophetic stance similar to theirs, but lived that stance quite differently. What the students will discover and can bring to each other is a number of rich dialectics. Christian students will discover a dialectic between apostolic and contemporary times as well as

between post apostolic faithful and contemporary believers. They will discover a dialectic among the symbols,stories, and images employed by people they identify with. They will discover history, contingency, and divergence in a non-alienating way that will help them begin to manage the divergence and contingency. The most important dialectic is the one John C. Meagher calls the dialectic between faith and belief:

> Despite the stern rigor with which the tradition has demanded that we persevere (or perseverate) in "unchangeable" beliefs, we must in the name of faith, recognize that the more authoritative voice of truth may cali us to a different stance. (34)

By helping our religiously committed students and all our students identify more fully with their communities and traditions and by encouraging them to turn to those reservoirs of experience, symbols, paradigmatic stories, and genres, we encourage them to explore and write from strength. At the same time, we encourage the full range of our students to see similar social-psychological, mythological, intellectual dynamics in new settings, and, as a result, the accidental communities that are our classrooms may begin to become communities of choice.

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